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**R e c o l l e c t i o n s o f**  
**Early Elkhart**

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**B y E. J. D A V I S,**  
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# Prologue



## A Word to Readers.

**I**N this little work will be found information not before seen in print, concerning the industries, trade and commerce of pioneer Elkhart and wholly different from records heretofore published. These recollections are those of a man who was an active and observant resident of what was here in a very early day and though not in trade he was in a business about which people of to-day, among later generations at least, know little or nothing. It is known in a general way that there was a river trade on the St. Joseph, but, with a very few exceptions, none know the magnitude of that trade, and since the village was very small evidently a work

simply dealing with its primitive life and shorn of all rhetorical embellishments and lengthy told tales must be brief. The object was to make a brief record of primitive Elkhart and her primitive connection with the outside world, and further, that the St. Jo River was the great highway and gave employment to more people and represented a greater money investment than all other traffic. The historian having been a pilot, of which profession he is the sole survivor, has told much that no other can tell, and much that has never been recorded. This little work was not gotten up for profit, but simply to record pleasant memories of two generations gone and to tell this public what has never before been told.



# **Recollections of Early Elkhart**



## **St. Jo River's Influence.**

All the historians of this county have given detailed accounts of the politics and early settlements, but so far none have given attention to the real early architects who devoted their money, brains, and energies to the development and expansion of the present Elkhart from its small beginnings. These, the real pioneers of this city, their investments and industries, which are the nucleus of all we now enjoy, have never engaged the attention of writers on the early reminiscences of this city. To peruse the average history as written one could scarcely guess the con-

nections with the outer world, how the village lived or by what methods or agents its traffic and trade were handled. The St. Joseph River, the prime factor and highway for all the commerce and trade demanded by the country tributary, is simply alluded to as a beautiful stream or passed over as an insignificant factor, while of a truth, it was the whole thing that gave impetus to every business, trade, and industry herein located. It was the great artery that joined the city or village to Chicago and the great developer of the great expanse of territory outlying for over a hundred miles east, the business, trade, and commerce of all of which went by this river and passed through Elkhart both east and west. This is apparently an insignificant matter in the works of the historians who have gone before. If only they had alluded to the fleet of watercraft and the scores of warehouses doing business on and along this river for a

hundred and seventy-five miles from Lake Michigan and that all the cereals grown in this extensive territory and all the merchandise demanded in return for consumption of whatever nature, this magnificent stream or highway would occupy its historic place in trade and commerce as it does in scenic beauty, for fully seventeen thousand five hundred square miles of the best grain-growing territory in the country contributed its wealth to and was floated down this river and all the merchandise floated up.



### **My Arrival.**

On June 17th, 1841, I came to this village from Shelby County, Ohio, and have continually resided here. I was then in my seventeenth year of age and started to make my way in the world. On my way here I stopped for nine days at

Wolf Lake, Noble County, Indiana, where I found employment on the dam then under construction.



## **The Village as I Found It.**

This village at that time had a population of something like two hundred and fifty souls, which was confined to that portion now known as North Elkhart as compared with the whole of the present city. Jackson Street, which is really the old Vistula road, was the great east and west thoroughfare while the business or trade portion was confined to that street and Main Street south to Pigeon Street. The mails were carried over the Vistula road, between Detroit, Ft. Wayne and Chicago by stagecoaches and these arrived on Jackson Street with the Hotel Bucklen site as a center. This site was occupied by a frame tavern whose landlord was named Runyon, who took as



much pride in his house and tables as the best do to-day. Opposite on the corner where now stands the Bucklen Drughouse, was also a frame tavern whose landlord was Eli Penwell, afterwards the first sheriff after the county had taken on judicial garments. This tavern was the stagehouse where the Detroit and Chicago stages stopped for an exchange of horses, this being a regular relay station and as important and interesting as the railway station of to-day. These stage arrivals brought the villagers to the tavern for news and curiosity the same as train arrivals invite the crowds to-day for a like purpose, to scrutinize and interrogate. The tavern called "The American" was built in 1844 on the site where now stands the Elkhart House and was supervised by Presley Thompson as landlord. On the peak of this tavern was mounted a huge steel triangle which was struck to call guests to meals or to announce that some-

thing had happened or was about to happen out of the ordinary. It too was sounded on the arrival of stages. This "sounder" was constructed and hung by Robert D. Braden, who then carried on blacksmithing. The "sounder" had the ear of every citizen day or night and had more influence on the population than could be told in the way of what was taking place—it was the monitor that was always heeded by everybody. The iron workers and blacksmiths were George N. Martin and Robert Sanford, (partners), James Keeler, James Shaw and Robert D. Braden, all of whom did no small part in forging the village to a healthy condition. Martin and Sanford were not only in the smith business but were prominent and partners in many other of the useful enterprises so necessary in the development of a young town, and so they are found in the lumber business, pottery manufacture and the operating of sawmills, the first

and last being among the prominent developing factors for any town or country. Martin constructed the first dam across the Elkhart River a short distance above the present Lane dam, and though a brush creation, it served long and well. The present raceway is the same that in those days conveyed the water to the two saw-mills located near where now stands the Lane Paper Mill opposite Pigeon Street. On this water-power Davenport and Fisher had a distillery in 1841, but it was either destroyed or removed and on the site a grist-mill was erected and run by Elisha Harn. All that property on Jackson Street east of Bucklen House to the Elkhart River, including all the buildings, among which was a dwelling, was in the market and for sale for fifty dollars. To-day fifty thousand could not buy it and this is but one of many such instances of valuable holdings, the output of the little village of sixty years ago. Of the pioneer

mercantile trade, the following named were the firms and individuals who supplied the village and surrounding country with all the needs and demands of civilized life, each and all engaging in a general merchandizing business, as no one branch could safely and profitably be conducted by itself; but each being able to answer all demands, thrift attended their efforts in opening up this new country. John Davenport and Son, Samuel Simonton, James and Anthony Defrees and Philo Morehous were the leading ones to contribute their money, brains, and energy in this undertaking and how well they foresaw our future greatness may best be told by looking out on the accretions they left for their legatees and the beautiful city now ours as the fruition of their acumen applied to industrial pursuits and a legacy left for generations to come.



## **A Transformation.**

On the northeast corner of Pigeon and Main Streets there was a two-story building intended for another tavern but it was never utilized as such and in 1842 it was appropriated to a large cooperage business which flourished for a time and then went out of business. The building was erected by George N. Martin and in later years it was removed east and converted into a carriage and wagon factory and finally that trade ceased and it was transformed into a livery stable and operated by William Hiller and Henry Betts. That stable stood where now the Meader Livery is located and finally disappeared to make room for more modern conveniences.



## **The Asheries.**

There were two asheries, one conducted by Levinus Pearce at the foot of High

Street on the St. Joseph River and the other managed by Philo Morehous on the Elkhart River at the foot of Jefferson Street, and though of no great proportions, they were among the necessities of civilized life.



## **The Band.**

In 1844 was organized the first musical or outdoor band with brass instruments under Joseph Pearson as bandmaster or musical director. E. R. and J. R. Beardsley were members of the organization.



## **Public School.**

The only schoolhouse was on Second Street opposite Mrs. John Cook's residence, R. T. Boggus being the teacher who right merrily wielded the birch and taught the boys and girls the paths of rectitude, 'rithmetic, reading and 'riting.

## **Medical Men.**

The medical profession was represented by Dr. Weimer and Dr. Chamberlain, father of Orville T. and Livy Chamberlain.



## **The Lawyers.**

The legal profession was not represented as such, but Samuel P. Beebee, then Justice of the Peace, did all legal and attorney's work demanded below the higher court, a place he filled with no little credit to himself and to the village and he did all the work, which shows the fewer the lawyers the fewer the litigants and in that early day people were too few to quarrel, so they arbitrated their differences.



## **Few Churches.**

Though churches were few Christians were many, and creeds, rituals and dogmas cut a narrow swath. The villagers held

divine services in the different houses by appointment and in Old Tammany Hall at the corner of Jefferson and Main Streets and later going under the name of the Old Beehive.



## **Pioneers' Amusements.**

As with all nations and peoples these pioneers had a vein of amusement to be gratified and there being no portable theaters as now, much less modes of conveyances, these early people devised such entertainments as they could with what they had on hand and forced their desires to conform to the means readiest, so they laid under tribute foot-racing, horseshoe pitching, marbles, and such as home ingenuity could invent and these sports were enjoyed on Main Street with no idea of having invaded the domain of boys and children. One might suppose they had seen the Mikado and borrowed his typical



motto, "Let the punishment fit the crime"—of being a pioneer, yet remembering "a little nonsense now and then is relished by the best of men."



### **Some Landmarks.**

General William B. Mitchell, who was the government agent for the removal of the Pottawattamie Indians from this section to their reservation, lived opposite the English Lutheran church and planted the beautiful pines now growing there. His granddaughter was the wife of the late United States Circuit Judge William A. Woods and her mother was Mary Mitchell Newton.



### **Telegraph and Conveyance.**

The first telegraph line was built in 1844 but public conveyance and transportation were delayed for several years following,

save by stagecoach and river boats, this last mode serving all the purposes of a railroad both as to freight and passenger traffic, giving water transportation for both with one transfer (at St. Jo) from Elkhart to Chicago.



## **River Trade and Commerce.**

Nearly all the freight traffic was carried by boats to St. Jo and thence to Chicago. In the spring, summer, and autumn the river enjoyed a monopoly of that trade while in the winter a small amount was done by wagons, but merchants as a rule, laid in their supplies for the year before navigation closed, so it may be said in a general way, the river did the freighting, as is evinced by the fleet of water-craft employed in the commerce between the head of navigation at Three Rivers and the mouth of the river. These boats gave employment to many river-men, (each

boat demanding from seven the smaller to ten men the larger as crews,) who otherwise would not have been here, besides much money was invested in boats and warehouses along the river, which last was an important factor for those seeking employment, these warehouses being the receiving and discharging depots of cargoes, flour to go down the river, (which amounted to from four hundred and fifty barrels of flour as cargo for the smaller boats to nine hundred and fifty barrels for the larger), and merchandise to be brought back, so that the St. Jo River was the great highway to Chicago and has done no little in the upbuilding of Elkhart and the development of the country tributary to it. When the days of boat traffic gave way to rapid transit by rail, this magnificent river was left to turn the wheels of countless industries for a farther development. The stream is worthy of all consideration since it has scores of beneficiaries all along its

banks, Elkhart being among its prominent ones, and should calamity overtake land transportation, the river with its smiles will welcome its old traffic and defend its commercial and historic record; therefore it is meet we pay homage to it and its old pilots.



## **Warehouses.**

In 1844 there were six river warehouses engaged in the traffic, one owned by Samuel Simonton, one by Jacob Ellis, one by Defrees, and another at the Island Park iron bridge owned by Jacob Ellis. There were six flour buildings connected with these warehouses wherein the flour was stored until the arrival of a boat. There were four on the Elkhart River and two on the St. Jo. One on the St. Jo and owned by Beardsley stood near his grist-mill and the other owned by Dickey Morton west of Eighth Street on the south bank of the St. Jo, so there must have

been a flour traffic here of good proportions. The towns along the river above were equally important factors though not paralleling this village.



## **The Pilot's First Voyage.**

In 1843 the historian made his maiden trip from Elkhart to St. Jo in a flat bottomed barge carrying a cargo of flour of several hundred barrels which was delivered at St. Jo in two days without mishap, and then the boat was poled back at about twenty-two miles per day. When the riffles, islands, and shoals are taken into account between here and St. Jo a safe voyage and delivery of the cargo were causes for congratulation, as the only sailing chart aboard or at hand was the pilot's memory, and many is the story told of dodging shoals, shooting rapids and bringing her nose up all right in the eye of the

channel—these are the proverbial sailors' happenings of pleasant memory.



## **Boats and Business.**

That the traffic on this river was very important is evidenced by its demanding sixty boats to care for it and this too between St. Jo and Three Rivers, the head of navigation, one hundred and seventy-five miles from the mouth. Among this fleet there was just one steamboat and she was owned at St. Jo and could ascend the river no farther than South Bend. Her name was "The Pocahontas," but having too much draught her business was abridged by not being able to ascend the river farther where so many good ports were located. But in a few years subsequent, steamboats of lighter draught came in for a share of the river trade but they never supplanted or laid up the ancient flat-bottomed barges which were

roomy and safe for a cargo, and these did business and held their places until river trade was finally and wholly abolished. The steamers made good headway, occupying only about one day between the extreme ports of St. Jo and Three Rivers, one hundred and seventy-five miles, both lockage and wooding included.



### **Steamboats.**

The steamboats were the Pocahontas, Indiana, Algoma, Niles, J. F. Porter, Mishawaka, and Michigan, though not all were able to run to the head of navigation, their draught being too great for the upper waters. The Mishawaka was a wonder for the times, since she was a side-wheeler with two engines, one for each paddle box, so that by the direct motion of the one and the reverse motion of the other she could be brought about in her length or be made to spin like a top. These

engines were thus placed in order that she could be made to evade obstructions quickly on a hardput helm. After all, the pilot was the man to whom the consignor looked for the safe delivery of the cargo and if he did not have his hydrographic chart well in his memory (for that is all he had) the chances of a safe voyage were against the consignor. To run the rapids, evade the shoals and keep the boat well in command to dodge islands and make the sharp turns that beset the river, his whole attention was continually at its best and highest, for let it be remembered this river is nothing if not a wrecker from source to near its mouth and these dangers so rapidly succeed each other that he no sooner has his craft out of the way of one than another looms in sight or, better, it is not quite in sight but he knows it when it fouls his boat.



## **River Dangers.**

Between here and South Bend going down river, the first danger point is Elkhart Shoals just before reaching Sturgeon Riffle, where the river swings well to the south and is rapid; then come in order, Burnt Man's and Killaman's Riffles, then Penn's Island, next Black Horse, then Willow Springs, then Dead Man's Island, then Little Sal and Crazy Sal Riffles, then Baubango, then Bell's Riffles, then Tow Heads, then Twin Islands, then Mishawaka Pond, then Twin Riffles, then Cripes Riffles and the boat has only reached South Bend, so that it takes no great nautical knowledge to know that a pilot who can guide his boat through these danger points by his memory for a hydrographic chart, could handle a water-craft scientifically in an open sea or in a clever stream. But these river pilots did, and seldom had to report flotsam or jetsam to the barge office. These pilots were

men cautious in the extreme, always alert, never losing their heads in an emergency nor their grip on the tiller; hence, safe voyages and dry consignments were the rule.



## **Great Flour Repository.**

At certain times on account of unsatisfactory markets or very low stages of water or some other foreign cause, as many as two hundred and fifty thousand barrels of flour would lie in the warehouses or be stored elsewhere awaiting transportation. This village was the great flour repository for this section of the country, Leesburg, Milford, Syracuse, Waterford, Monoquet, Goshen, and other places north of the village making this place the depot for shipment. In those days this was a wheat growing territory and the yield was enormous. Too, these outlying towns away from the river received their freight here

in return and this made the warehouse business the greatest of all the industries; so again are we admonished of the varied advantages the St. Jo River furnished. It is a mooted question whether the St. Jo River was not a greater factor in the upbuilding of this city than the railways, all things considered, and whether the country's development is not more largely due to the river than the railways. So important is this river that the government, when Judge John H. Baker was a congressman from this district, ordered a survey by U. S. Engineers in order to determine the feasibility of slack water navigation between here and St. Jo and an appropriation was made for the work, but it was reported to be more expensive than the traffic would warrant. This however is not a finality, since the cities on its banks have increased tenfold in population and trade too since that time, and these are yet only in infancy. Likewise has the

country tributary to these cities increased in a like ratio, so that it is a safe prediction to say that at no distant future, water communication will be entertained again between here and Chicago and this prediction has immensely more argument to support it than the theory of electric cars as an investment could have had even no farther back than a score of years. This is the age of harnessing Nature's elements for our uses, convenience and pleasure; therefore may St. Joseph again come under the yoke. Rivers all over the United States, of far less magnitude and importance, have been improved and enlarged by government aid because of the demands for ready and cheap transportation of thrifty and growing cities located thereon. Streams in Oregon, Washington, and others of the newer states have been made navigable by the government, because of local traffic demands. The annual river and harbor appropriations of congress are, like

the postal appropriations, those of the people as an integer and closer connected with general industries and well subserve the democratic idea of the greatest good to the greatest number, and to this end concentrated effort is only demanded through our congressional representative; in a word, the game is well worth the ammunition.



## **An Interstate Waterway.**

Every year sees this great enterprise a little nearer consummation, but like all enduring projects it is slow in formulation. A great ship waterway, both as a commercial and military necessity, must finally eventuate between the great West and tide-water and Elkhart is fortunately located on or near the alignment of that great work with the St. Jo River as the primitive factor at the initial of the work; indeed the estimates, one hundred millions, have already been made and routes lined out and

compared. It is a gigantic enterprise to be sure, but this government knows no limit nor stops for obstructions when once it concludes to act—none are great enough to hinder or invite abandonment and this one has been in public favor and the public mind for a score of years, the survey of the St. Jo along in the seventies being the initial work on slack water navigation and Chicago the western terminal. The great industrial development of the far West, both agricultural and mineral, has presented an imperious demand for cheaper transportation of products than land conveyance can possibly respond to, and then there is a military emergency always present and always growing. The “Soo,” the great outlet for this immense traffic, is ice-bound months in the year when a southern way would be in full operation and, what is an overwhelming argument, the distance to tide-water would be abridged four hundred miles or more. There is to-day more ton-

nage of Western industries and products passing the "Soo" than is shipped from all the country to Europe of all the products and industries elsewhere, and statistics further show that the accommodations for this tonnage from the upper to the lower waters are quite insufficient, great as they are at that point, and if this be true now what must be the result in a few decades of years? But over and above all is the rapid development of the great West whose demands at present are far in advance of transportation facilities, with the untoward circumstances of cause and effect growing yearly. It demands no prophet nor revelation to show that a release must be had and that soon in order to abate the congestion, now only in its infancy. Elkhart lies close by or directly in the alignment of this great waterway. It cannot pass more than two miles to the south of the central city and it can never pass north of the city by reason of the topography and con-

figuration of the country, all thalwegs running north and south after passing to the north side of the St. Jo River; the river therefore is the lowest possible level and the base of all estimates, arguments, and engineering data.



## **The Two Routes.**

There are simply two routes for this waterway, both contiguous to Elkhart, though one would pass through the city, depending somewhat on whether Michigan City or St. Jo were made the western terminal. Each has its special advantages, though the one by the St. Jo River has its natural ones, over the south route wholly artificial. This route would cut diagonally the streams flowing into the Kankakee River and would encounter heavy excavations at and contiguous to Rolling Prairie, the crest of a north and south ridge between the Kankakee River



and Grapevine Creek heading near South Bend. It would find no feeder until tapping the Elkhart River at Goshen, but from thence through Wawasee Lake it would find good alignment until it reached the divide that sends the waters into the St. Mary's and St. Joseph and outflowing at Ft. Wayne, and the waters of the Elkhart, Fawn River and St. Jo, outflowing west into Lake Michigan at St. Jo. The second route calls for slack water navigation to Elkhart from St. Jo, with an abundance of feeders east to the divide above alluded to, with no serious obstacles or great excavations on the line. The distance by this route would not materially differ from the south route and would have the natural advantages of feeders and lowest levels.



### **The Object of the Work.**

The object of this little work is more to get on record what has been overlooked by

previous writers and that the present adult generation and those following may know of Elkhart's small beginnings and compare them with her magnificent proportions now some sixty years of age and make note of the men and agents whence came these. As an ulterior design, it is to draw attention to the beautiful river which has been so generous and benignant a donor for the gratification of our eyes and pleasures, and the plethora of our pockets as well; likewise to call attention to a fact to be sooner or later entertained, its modern development, and if this labor shall have such an effect, the highest ambition of the historian will have been subserved. The prominent men and factors only have been briefly noticed, but they are of those connections and that nature never before recorded, and being those of an early day, the sketch must of necessity be brief; besides, details only burden a simple truth. Modern Elkhart, modern factors, and what she is to-

day have been purposely omitted and only primitive Elkhart has entered into consideration. These pages might have been indefinitely extended, but that would only have burdened our object and shorn our purpose of a simple and brief recital of fundamental Elkhart.

E. J. DAVIS,  
St. Jo River Pilot.



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